# Unionism and Separatism - Politics in Nostromo

by Matthew Waller

Decoud's plan of political Separation in Nostromo is more than a plot point. It is the tip of a thematic iceberg than pervades the novel and which, when raised to the light, makes clear the extent of Conrad's political insight with ongoing ramifications for our own time and those to come.

Separatism in the novel is contrasted with Unionism, to form what is presented as an eternal political cycle governing the rise and fall of states. The history of the fictional Costaguana illustrates the cycle: beginning with the Spanish conquest (an empire-building, or Unionist enterprise), it proceeds through Independence (Separatism), then Federation (further Separatism), then the forcible uniting of Costaguana under Guzman Bento (Unionism). Decoud extends the cycle to another turn of Separatism, and the novel ends with Antonia and Bishop Corbelan voicing the popular agitation for reuniting Costaguana once again.

On a smaller scale, the novel's three parts correspond to a complete turn through the cycle. Part One deals with Unionism by chronicling the rise of the San Tomé mine, explicitly as if it were a nascent state (it is an "Imperium in Imperio"). We see it drawing adherents, spreading security, attracting investment, finally establishing its own government with Don Vincente Ribiera at the head. In Part Two, which begins with the Monterist revolt, we watch all this fall apart. Part Two deals with the force of Separatism in a powerfully thematic way. As soon as Decoud voices his plan for political Separation of the Occidental Province the rolling ball of Separatism gets away from him and we watch all unity within the province disintegrate as well, plunging Sulaco into an anarchy of competing factions. Part Three begins in that anarchic chaos, then illustrates Unionism again by showing the reuniting of the shattered province as a new country. In each of the novel's parts, the particular turn of the cycle guides Conrad's choice of metaphor, incident, and imagery. Thus in Part One we find Don Pepe boasting that "No two stones could come together anywhere without the Gobernador hearing the click, Señora." Likewise, Part Two ends with a society of three -- Nostromo, Decoud and Hirsch -- gradually being whittled down to a society of one: Nostromo alone, swimming in the Gulf, the ultimate image of Separatism.

It has been said that Nostromo expresses the futility of politics, the conviction that politics as we know them cannot solve Man's most pressing problems. While such a reading is true, it is too basic: it does not address the detail in which Conrad examines the two political forces, illuminating their particular flaws and explaining how they fail us, and why one inevitably leads to the other. Such an understanding is particularly helpful to us today at the turn of the 21st Century, when a global era of post-colonial Separatism and atomization is giving way to a renewed turn of imperial Unionism -- one in which Nostromo's Holroyd almost seems to be writing speeches for the Bush Administration.

The larger theme of Nostromo is the role of idealism in psychological life, contrasted with that of skepticism. To understand the nature of

Conrad's political cycle, one must first understand the psychological theme, for Unionism and Separatism are but the political counterparts of idealism and skepticism. Indeed, the two are almost inseparably wedded in Decoud, the prototypical skeptic who is also the prototypical Separatist: it is he who advances the Separatist plan, and all of his scenes save one occur in Part Two, the Separatist part. (His one appearance in Part Three follows Captain Mitchell's complacent, satisfied speech celebrating Unity; his action is to commit suicide, as if in protest.) His denunciations of idealism are conducted almost entirely in terms of denouncing national patriotism; his war against "belief" is directed specifically at belief in government:

Though she had managed to make a Blanco journalist of him, he was no patriot. First of all, the word has no sense for cultured minds, to whom the narrowness of every belief is odious; and secondly, in connexion with the everlasting troubles of this unhappy country it was hopelessly besmirched; it had been the cry of dark barbarism, the cloak of lawlessness, of crimes, of rapacity, of simple thieving.

Unionism, like idealism, is presented as the dedication to an illusion. The illusion is not merely the patriotic ideal -- it is the very belief, within any organized human activity, that its members share a common goal. Nostromo argues that in fact there is no common goal, that no two people have exactly the same world-view and that each person's ambition is ultimately for the benefit of himself or herself alone. True cooperation is thus impossible. Although two people may have the same immediate goal, their private ambitions are unique, divergent, and ultimately opposed to each other, so that cooperation becomes a matter of either mistaken assumptions or outright deceit. Part One, which deals with Unionism, is filled with examples of this sort of secret fracture undermining alliances and projects. Sir John and the chief engineer work together for the railroad, though they are "two personalities, who had not the same vision of the world." When Charles Gould and Holroyd launch the San Tomé mine together, each believes himself to be using the other: Holroyd sees himself as "running a man," while to Gould, "the other man appeared for an instant as a dreamy idealist of no importance." Don José Avellanos supports Charles Gould's project because he believes they have a common patriotic agenda ("Oh, you two patriots!" he cries to Charles and his wife), not realizing that the Goulds will eventually sever Costaguana in pursuit of what is a decidedly supra-patriotic vision. Even the fundamental partnership of a marriage is shown, in the case of the Goulds, to be based on the same sort of mistake. Mrs Gould is initially attracted to Charles' "unsentimentalism," though he is nothing if not fanatically sentimental (a point Decoud hammers home to Mrs Gould when he describes him as a "Sentimentalist, sentimentalist . . . sentimentalist, after the amazing manner of your people"). Charles, for his part, "imagined that he had fallen in love with a girl's sound common sense," when common sense is precisely the quality that Mrs Gould lacks (the narrator describes her as lacking "even the most legitimate touch of materialism"). Though the Goulds launch the San Tomé mine as a common endeavor, their subtly clashing agendas eventually drive them to the point where "He seemed to dwell alone within a circumvallation of precious metal, leaving her outside with her school, her hospital, the sick mothers, and the feeble old men, mere insignificant vestiges of the initial inspiration."

All people, indeed, ultimately dwell alone, Nostromo posits, living in worlds of their own invention, and the pursuit of each world becomes the pursuit of a private and imaginary vision whose success is measured in how many other real people can be convinced into supporting it. If cooperation begins with an erroneous belief in the common goal, it quickly expands into an illusion of a common ideal -- one that develops a life of its own. On the grand scale, this ideal becomes politics -- Unionist politics.

Unionism is expansionism: it is the relentless process of converting more and more people to a common idea, be it political, religious, or -- what Nostromo explores most of all -- economic. Where people resist seduction by the idea, force is used. Sir John aims to acquire land for the railroad by impressing the landowners with a Presidential tour, but makes it clear that the railroad will get the land regardless, "even if it had to use force for the purpose." The expansionist theme permeates Part One in the form of the growth of the material interests in Costaguana. We see it in the plans of Sir John, which involve "a project for systematic colonization of the Occidental Province." We find it stressed to an ominous degree in the trumpeting speeches of Holroyd, who proclaims that the United States "shall be giving the word for everything: industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics, and religion, from Cape Horn clear over to Smith's Sound, and beyond, too, if anything worth taking hold of turns up at the North Pole. And then we shall have the leisure to take in hand the outlying islands and continents of the earth." Unionism is naked conquest, but it is also a growing sentiment, an animating principle, "a subtle force that could set in motion mighty machines, men's muscles, and awaken also in human breasts an unbounded devotion to the task." In the following description of workers being drawn to the San Tomé mine, the Unionist force is given almost physical shape:

Whole families had been moving from the first towards the spot in the Higuerota range, whence the rumour of work and safety had spread over the pastoral Campo, forcing its way also, even as the waters of a high flood, into the nooks and crannies of the distant blue walls of the Sierras.

But the most concisely revealing Unionist speech in the novel is Charles Gould's, which defends the material interests on the basis of "security" for the people while at the same time admitting that this very security is something one must "impose" upon them:

Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people.

There is an enormous optimism to Unionism -- it encourages its adherents to believe that problems can be solved, things can be accomplished, advances can be made. In the larger scheme, Nostromo maintains that these beliefs are an illusion, and that the human condition remains intractable (we are given a foreshadowing hint of this at the beginning of Part One, where Giorgio Viola meditates on Garibaldi's failed campaign to unify Italy). But in the main, Unionism in Part One receives an optimistic

treatment. Don Pepe, for instance, who governs the population of the mine, is presented as the model of a benevolent ruler: he knows all his workers by name, and the workers in return call him "father." And yet the absolute authority he wields over his people is in essence no different from that of any dictator, including the worst of them, Guzman Bento.

Guzman Bento typifies the brutalities of Costaguana's past. The novel describes at length the cruelties of his reign -- Dr. Monygham, Don José Avellanos and Henry Gould are all victims of it -- and in many ways Guzman Bento is held up as the example of everything the material interests hope to replace. And yet Bento is a Unionist figure, "the barbarous unionist general." His role in the novel is, in fact, to represent the logical culmination of all Unionist movements. On the traditional political spectrum Bento is the right-most of the figures in Nostromo; he is a proto-fascist for whom "The power of Supreme Government had become in his dull mind an object of strange worship, as if it were some sort of cruel deity. It was incarnated in himself . . ." If Unionism is the effort to bring people together in a single ideal, then its extreme state is tyranny: the effort to force all mankind to the obeisance of a single will. The innumerable proliferation of unique individual ambitions, ever competing for influence, must eventually cough up a victor, who becomes psychologically indistinguishable from the ideal he serves. Having invented in 1904 the monstrous Guzman Bento, Conrad made the correct prediction that the 20th century would see much blood spilt in the name of worshipping the personified ideal of a centralized State:

It was the same Guzman Bento who, becoming later Perpetual President, famed for his ruthless and cruel tyranny, reached his apotheosis in the popular legend of a sanguinary land-haunting spectre whose body had been carried off by the devil in person from the brick mausoleum in the nave of the Church of Assumption in Sta Marta. Thus, at least, the priests explained its disappearance to the barefooted multitude that streamed in, awestruck, to gaze at the hole in the side of the ugly box of bricks before the great altar.

The hundred years after Nostromo's publication having brought us Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini and Mao, there is little indication at the turn of the 21st Century that the "land-haunting spectre" has been placed back in its box. Conrad's prophetic vision was made possible by his understanding of the Unionist impulse in political life: what makes it attractive and of what it in fact consists.

Indeed, if we take a small step leftward along the spectrum we come to a character of immediate import to our dawning century: that of Holroyd. Holroyd is the prefiguring type of the "religious right" movement that has gained such prominence in the United States: he combines patriotic worship of America ("Time itself has got to wait on the greatest country in the whole of God's Universe") with religious fervor, the mixture producing "an insatiable appetite for conquest." In Unionist terms, he differs from Guzman Bento only in the presumption of personal rule; Holroyd has transferred the object of worship to the external ideals of country, God, and commerce. But he is no less tyrannical for that: "We shall run the world's business," he says, "whether the world likes it or not." Such statements might easily be found issuing from the current U.S.

Administration. It appears to be the case that the world is emerging from a half-century's turn through the Separatist cycle, in which empires and nations have been atomized and local identities rewarded, and beginning now a renewed turn to Unionism under the aegis of an expansionist United States. Since Conrad predicted it, we would all do well to heed the political analysis contained in his most political novel.

Unionism always begins by promising peace. Even Guzman Bento, in Part One, is presented as the man who brought "twelve years of peace" to Costaguana following the period of Federation, which is described as an "epoch of civil wars" characterized by "fierce and blindly ferocious political fanaticism." (The severest cruelties of his own reign are not revealed until Part Two, which is to say, through the Separatist lens.) The problem with Unionism is that, despite whatever grandly reformist ideals are attached to it, in the end it must boil down to personal and tyrannical rule, because the motive power behind it is the irreconcilable self-serving illusion governing the individual. Charles Gould, too, sets out on "the conquest of peace for Sulaco," but as his quest proceeds he instigates one war, defends against a second with conscripted troops, and in the pinch is willing to sacrifice everything to his personal desires. His resolve to blow up the San Tomé mine, if acted upon, would mean the end of prosperity, investment and any sort of "peace" for the province -- but it would satisfy his increasingly fanatic sense of possessive connection to the mine, based on what the narrator calls "the almost mystic view he took of his right." We cannot help connecting this mystic right with his popular nickname, "the King of Sulaco," connoting not just the backstage rulership of the material interests, but the absolutist urge lurking behind the so-called dedication to reform.

Having submitted that all forms of government are various justifications of the same selfish desire, Conrad draws a distinction based on political sophistication. Straight dictatorship in Nostromo is seen both the most brutal and, paradoxically, the most innocent form of government. The Costaguana dictators and functionaries are presented as simple, childlike, and frequently quite funny. General Montero, Barrios, Sotillo, and the various provincial authorities are presented as buffoons, ruled by the immediate impulses of greed, yet at the same time "clear-minded" compared to their idealistic counterparts:

There is always something childish in the rapacity of the passionate, clear-minded, Southern races, wanting in the misty idealism of the Northerners, who at the smallest encouragement dream of nothing less than the conquest of the earth. Sotillo was fond of jewels, gold trinkets, of personal adornment.

To Conrad, the power-struggle to gain adherents to a private world is most honestly expressed by the uncomplicated desire to rule everyone personally. Because this honesty extends to methods of conquest, dictatorship is also the most directly tragic. One's opponents are put down, or one is put down by them, at which point a new government begins. It is a different matter, however, to break apart a sophisticated state unified by a guiding ideology. That requires a Separatist movement.

If Unionism consists of cooperation based on mistaken belief in a common goal, Separatism consists simply of the recognition that there is no common goal. In Part Two Mrs Gould samples, against her wishes, the opinions of several members of the Ribierist party, which is supposedly united by "one common master-thought in their heads," and finds them to be motivated by a diverse motley of private self-serving agendas. To Barrios, the goal is to "grow rich, one and all, like so many Englishmen," while Scarfe, the young engineer, participates because "It would give him the pull over a lot of chaps all through life." It is with a "slightly worried graciousness" that she listens to the chief engineer, who is along for the ride apparently because "The humours of railway building in South America appealed to his keen appreciation of the absurd." Finally turning to her husband in search of the most basic sense of shared purpose, she is met with his unilateral resolve to go "Any distance, any length, of course," openly regardless of the consequence to her. Later, Decoud begins to tell her that his own private agenda is the love of Antonia:

'You would not believe me if I were to say that it is the love of the country which--'

She made a sort of discouraged protest with her arm, as if to express that she had given up expecting that motive from anyone.

If the San Tomé mine within Costaguana is an "Imperium in Imperio," then so is any group within a larger group, and ultimately the individual within the State. Decoud, who advances the plan of formal Separation for the Occidental Province, has as his goal a form of Unity: namely, of himself with his beloved Antonia. "I cannot part with Antonia," his logic goes, "therefore the one and indivisible Republic of Costaguana must be made to part with its western province." He also imagines that the Occidental Province will retain a Unity of its own. Neither happens. "I thought I could depend on every man in this province. It was a mistake," he says, after the neighboring city of Esmeralda goes over to the enemy, the parliament of Sulaco elects not to mount a resistance, and Decoud is forced to flee town in the opposite direction from Antonia. Decoud is in fact hoisted on his own Separatist petard, because his arguments for the plan were based on exposing the illusion of Unity and appealing to individualized motive. In the Casa Gould he mercilessly dissects the self-interest of Charles Gould ("You just ask him to throw his mine into the melting-pot for the great cause") and Father Corbelan ("The idea of political honour, justice, and honesty for him consists in the restitution of the confiscated Church property"), and he enlists Mrs Gould's help by appealing directly to her own personal altruistic sentiment.

Think also of your hospitals, of your schools, of your ailing mothers and feeble old men, of all that population which you and your husband have brought into the rocky gorge of San Tomé. Are you not responsible to your conscience for all these people?

Once the illusion of common cause has been bombed, no form of Unity can be maintained on any level. The word "Separation" is first breathed in Chapter 2-6; by the beginning of the next chapter the riots have begun and Sulaco has fallen into utter anarchy.

Anarchy marks the opposite pole from tyranny, and Nostromo portrays both extremes as unlivable. If the zenith of Unionism is the megalomaniacal rule of a single man, the nadir of Separatism is the unrestrained combat of each against all. Ungoverned man, in Conrad's view, is a creature motivated by the lowest motives of greed and innate antagonism. The Sulaco riots are caused by nothing more than the absence of troops and the presence in the Customs House of a fortune in silver, combined with general license following the news that the government has fallen. The silver has a force of defenders in the cargadores, but their motives for fighting are just as base: "They embraced with delight this opportunity to settle their personal scores under such favourable auspices." During its anarchic period Sulaco is contested between Sotillo, who is after plunder, and Pedro Montero, who desires power for the sake of "the command of every pleasure."
Nostromo suggests as a principle that Man is at his worst when he is farthest from authority. Sotillo, when recruiting "in the remote Campo," once ordered a man to be flayed alive. Gamacho, the local politician, had "murdered a pedlar in the woods and stolen his pack to begin life on." It is "in a remote country district" where the Finance Minister is suspected of a violent robbery, despite holding the local position of a judge. The scene of Sotillo torturing Hirsch, the centerpiece of the novel's anarchic section, speaks for itself. Decoud's shattering of government has served merely to release the lowest instincts in all. "It is a fine country," says Dr. Monygham, "and they have raised a fine crop of hates, vengeance, murder, and rapine."

The Separatist themes are given their most highly artistic presentation in the symbolic journey of Nostromo, Decoud and Hirsch that concludes Part Two. Supposedly alone, Nostromo and Decoud are sent to sea in a lighter in the dead of night to escort the silver cache to safety. The lighter immediately becomes a society in miniature, holding the aristocracy that provides the political purpose, the laboring class that provides the muscle, and the silver that stands symbolically for the Unionist illusion (the lighter is loaded by the Eurpoeans "as if the silver of the mine had been the emblem of a common cause," and when it's gone we learn that the "loading the silver was their last concerted action"). As the lighter proceeds, the darkness of the Gulf enhances the related themes of Separatism and Skepticism: it casts doubt on the existence of everything but the self, subsuming both the physical world and other people:

He had the strangest sensation of his soul having just returned into his body from the circumambient darkness in which land, sea, sky, the mountains, and the rocks were as if they had not been.

Nostromo's voice was speaking, though he, at the tiller, was also as if he were not.

The darkness is broken by a light -- a candle -- for the unexpected introduction of Hirsch, the terrified Jewish stowaway; this bit of Unity concluded, the light vanishes again. Hirsch completes the society of the lighter by giving it an unwanted underclass ("Even if he were as brave as a lion we would not want him here," Nostromo says), but he also completes it in an allegorical fashion because he stands for Fear -- suggesting that fear is the unadmitted stowaway of every Unionist endeavor. Given Conrad's

portrayal of anarchic chaos, we are now in a position to infer that whatever glorious cause may be trumpeted by a Unionist movement, ultimately what unites people behind it is simple terror of the alternative. The inference is made explicit by Conrad when the lighter is struck and crippled: in their efforts to guide it to the island Nostromo and Decoud are shown to be utterly Separated beings lost in their own chosen meaning, "two adventurers pursuing each his own adventure," united finally by the "imminence of deadly peril" alone:

Each of them was as if utterly alone with his task. It did not occur to them to speak. There was nothing in common between them but the knowledge that the damaged lighter must be slowly but surely sinking. In that knowledge, which was like the crucial test of their desires, they seemed to have become completely estranged, as if they had discovered in the very shock of the collision that the loss of the lighter would not mean the same thing to them both. This common danger brought their differences in aim, in view, in character, and in position, into absolute prominence in the private vision of each. There was no bond of conviction, of common idea; they were merely two adventurers pursuing each his own adventure, involved in the same imminence of deadly peril. Therefore they had nothing to say to each other. But this peril, this only incontrovertible truth in which they shared, seemed to act as an inspiration to their mental and bodily powers.

Peril, according to Conrad, is the source of all human "inspiration," the motive for all action, the foundation of all common projects. In a world of irreconcilably subjective, clashing, illusory, individualized ambition, the "only incontrovertible truth" that serves to unite mankind is danger, and the only truly common motive is fear. All else is built on that.

Part Three, which opens with the long night of Sulaco anarchy, and then shows society knitting itself back together, illustrates this principle in a variety of ways. Chief among them is the highly thematic chapter in which Don Pepe resolves to have the San Tomé miners march on the town. As in Part One, Conrad uses the San Tomé mine to illustrate Unionism, but the tone is now different. The optimism and sense of advancement that characterized Part One are gone, replaced by a huddled defensiveness. The notion of "protection" occurs twice in this summary of the mine's power:

In a very few years the sense of belonging to a powerful organization had been developed in these harassed, half-wild Indians. They were proud of, and attached to, the mine. It had secured their confidence and belief. They invested it with a protecting and invincible virtue as though it were a fetish made by their own hands, for they were ignorant, and in other respects did not differ appreciably from the rest of mankind which puts infinite trust in its own creations. It never entered the alcalde's head that the mine could fail in its protection and force.

Note that the illusory quality of Unionism is much in evidence here too -- the mine is a "fetish" in which the "ignorant" put their "trust." It is also subtly suggested that the Unified are "harassed" by their adherence, oppression being the inevitable alternative to anarchy in Conrad's political cycle. And yet the primary sense of this Unity is of a defensive formation.

The chapter, however, illustrates how Unionism progresses quickly from its defensive origin to a moral sentiment that justifies external aggression. The first danger of Unionism is that it creates a border, a division between us and them. The alcalde "listened to the news from the town with curiosity and indifference, as if concerning another world than his own." To Don Pepe, crossing the border bridge away from the mine is to enter "the land of thieves and sanguinary macaques," colloquially denying the Outsiders even their humanity. From there, it is a short leap from defense to moral crusade in the name of "what ought to be done." What ought to be done in this case, according to Don Pepe, is that "the mine should march upon the town with guns, axes, knives tied up to sticks -- por Dios. That is what should be done." And that is exactly what happens. The march of the miners is critical to the consolidation of the Occidental Republic under the power of the material interests: in a sense the nascent expansionist "State" of San Tomé has engaged in successful outward conquest.

The same Occidental Republic that was Separatism for Decoud has become, in the ungoverned free-for-all of Sulaco, Unionism for San Tomé -- and for Father Corbelan, who argues the cause of the new nation under the banner, "Heaven itself wills it." In this cry we can again hear the illusory moral justification of Unionism, and it is worth recalling Decoud's cry that started the whole cycle: "Nature itself seems to cry to us 'Separate!'" Though Decoud was referring to the mountainous border, these lines have a deeper meaning relating to the essence of the political cycle: Separatism derives its power from human nature (the individuation of desire), whereas Unionism derives its authority from the appeal to higher causes. One may say with justice that Unionism is the attempt to escape from human nature.

Does Conrad place any faith in the political center, as an alternative to the extremes of tyranny and anarchy? The dispiriting answer can be found in the figure of Don Juste Lopez, Sulaco's staunch defender of parliamentary forms. Don Juste is portrayed as hapless and powerless, swaying at the winds of the dictator of the day, easily interpreting Montero's military victory into an "accomplished fact" worthy of respectable consideration, his opinions of less than no account:

The acceptance of accomplished facts may save yet the precious vestiges of parliamentary institutions. Don Juste's eyes glowed dully; he believed in parliamentary institutions -- and the convinced drone of his voice lost itself in the stillness of the house like the deep buzzing of some ponderous insect.

Moreover, Don Juste himself is no freer of the will to power than anyone else. When the material interests triumph, he becomes both the head of the Parliamentary party and the Chief of State, a self-contradictory office that eloquently portrays the executive dreams hidden in the parliamentary heart.

The triumph of the material interests sets the stage for the final four chapters of the novel, and with it comes, I believe, a suggestion that the political cycle may be changing, in form if not in essence. Since out of all of Conrad's novels, this one devotes the most thought to the nature of

capitalism, and since the agenda of the 21st Century is likely to be set by the demands of globalized capital, it behooves us to conclude with a close look at the society of the Occidental Republic.

Nostromo's politically-minded critics have spent much debate over this society in an effort to prove that Conrad was painting capitalism as either good or bad. Both camps can find details to support their wing. The Occidental Republic is opposed by a radical left-wing movement (described as "anarchists" by Conrad in his author's note), and Dr. Monygham speaks with the voice of authority when he denounces the material interests' law as "inhuman." The novel is sprinkled with sentimental digs against capitalism, from a detailed description of how the beautiful San Tomé gorge is devastated by the mine, to the canceling of popular festivals when the land is taken by the railway, to the narrator complaining about "the material apparatus of perfected civilization which obliterates the individuality of old towns under the stereotyped conveniences of modern life." For all that, however, the Republic is stable, prosperous, and infinitely preferable to the barbarity of Costaguana's past. Critics looking for a manifesto against capitalism are brought up short by the figure of the anarchists' president, "an indigent, sickly, somewhat hunchbacked little photographer, with a white face and a magnanimous soul dyed crimson by a bloodthirsty hate of all capitalists, oppressors of the two hemispheres." This figure anchors the political spectrum on the opposite side from Guzman Bento, and one feels that he would be just as merciless were he placed in power. The fact is, Conrad places hope neither in capitalism nor its opposition (nor indeed any political system). What he does do is offer insights into capitalistic society that can guide our understanding of our own times.

The first oddity we notice about the Occidental Republic is an apparent inconsistency in the Unionism/Separatism cycle: the Unionist movement is coming not from the government but from the marginalized protest movement. It is they who are agitating for reunification with the rest of Costaguana, and they are blocked by the governing material interests, who, Dr Monygham says, "will not let you jeopardize their development for a mere idea of pity and justice." "Development" of the ruling power, then, has shifted dimensions and is no longer a matter of political borders. Coincident with this, we find that the imperial statue of Charles IV -- a dramatic symbol of political conquest -- has been removed. "It was an anachronism," comments Captain Mitchell. For the new arena of conquest, Mitchell directs our attention to "Sulaco National Bank there, with the sentry boxes each side of the gate," a subtle image that conveys the economic battlefield of the modern world.

Indeed, though political borders still exist, the nation as a motivating idea is dead. The Occidental Republic is a world in which all powers and all conflicts have moved to the international arena. This is true of the ruling forces of capital, whose harbor entertains friendly gunboats from both the United States and Germany in these chapters; it is true of the radical opposition, whose president includes "the two hemispheres" in his indictment and whose adherents speak of "the cruel wrongs suffered by our brothers" across the border; it is even true of the religious battlefield, in which Father Corbelan travels to Rome to be made Cardinal-Archbishop in "a counter-move to the Protestant invasion of Sulaco organized by the

Holroyd Missionary Fund." In this new world, it seems, political borders are meaningless, and we recall the strictly economic terms in which Holroyd phrased the imperial ambitions of the United States: "We shall run the world's business whether the world likes it or not."

The novel ends with a workers' revolt breaking out at the silver mine, presaging that the demise of capitalism will come from within, and that the modern world's most crucial antagonism is between "the world's business" and the world's labor. But of what does this antagonism consist? Bishop Corbelan threatens that the oppressed people will "rise and claim their share of the wealth and their share of the power," implying that motives of greed and domination have yet to go out of style, but I think the novel goes deeper than that.

Capitalism, as portrayed by Conrad, is the most self-sublimating of the Unionist movements. Its rulers -- Holroyd, Sir John, Charles Gould -- are none of them political men; none of them seek personal rule. They are highly idealistic, even fanatic men, who cloak themselves in dreams of destiny, grandeur or morality, but they are not throne-seekers. The theme of self-sublimation gets its most personal treatment in the figure of Charles Gould, who starts by prohibiting himself speech and ends by becoming as emotionless as the metal he mines. Indeed, there is a sense in which the "material interests" are primarily concerned with material alone, above and instead of human beings, themselves included. Charles Gould, describing Holroyd, says that he can "suffer from no sense of defeat. He may have to give in, or he may have to die tomorrow, but the great silver and iron interests shall survive." (Mrs Gould, in a line her husband doesn't get, calls this a "most awful materialism.") Charles himself becomes willing to sacrifice not only his miners to the dynamite but himself to a firing squad in defense of the purity of his metal. It is this self-extinguishing aspect that Dr Monygham names when he calls the material interests "inhuman" and amoral in his famous speech:

There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law, and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle.

Mrs Gould, echoing this verdict, has a private vision of the San Tomé mine as "more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst Government." The material interests can be worse than "the worst government" because they are, in Monygham's word, "inhuman"; they are "soulless" and "pitiless" because they are not run for human beings, and perhaps not by them.

Capitalism, according to its presentation in Nostromo, aspires to be the ultimate escape from human nature. The result is a society that presents a polished and orderly upper surface, while thrusting all human conflicts underground. The statue of Charles IV is to be replaced by a shaft "with angels of peace at the four corners, and bronze Justice holding an even balance, all gilt, on the top," while the protest movement has taken the form of "secret societies." Dr. Monygham runs a "Sanitary Commission" so deplored by the people that he worries about getting a knife in his back. In like manner he and Mrs Gould squelch all signs of love for the sake of

outward propriety, not only protecting the image of the Goulds' marriage but intervening when Nostromo is suspected of an illicit affair. The fight against this society -- both politically by the opposition with their "idea of pity and justice" and symbolically by Nostromo with his illicit love -- is literally a fight for life: human life, with all its antagonisms, passions and personalities.

The cycle of Unionism and Separatism continues in the world of globalized capital, Conrad suggests, but it has been reduced to its essentials: it is the cycle of dominance as such vs. resistance to dominance as such, politically and economically; it is the imposition of illusory common ideals to a socially-homogenizing and self-eliminating extent vs. the liberation of every human impulse. In its simplest (and in our time all-pervasive) form it is the war of the small against the big: the small merchant vs. the multinational corporation, the independent film vs. the Hollywood blockbuster, the provocatively malleable lifestyle vs. the church; the individual vs. the police (it is no accident that the final image of Nostromo includes a circling police-boat). This is not peace by any means, nor does Conrad project that it will ever lead to peace. It is an ongoing dynamic, that we may perhaps hope to tame but never to control, between the conflicting desires of "inhuman" order and human lawlessness.

The novel leaves it an open question as to which is worse.

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